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SUBJECT: Key Brazilian Senator Voices Concern over Venezuelan
Influence, Democracy

¶1. (SBU) Summary. During a lunch Ambassador Sobel gave on August 8 as part of a broader outreach to Brazilian senators (septel), the Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations and National Defense Committee, Heraclito Fortes, expressed concerns about threats to democracy from Venezuela and Bolivia. A member of the principal opposition party, Senator Fortes said the fact that Chavez and Morales are working together to spread their ideology is worrisome, and that Mercosul is right to create barriers against the accession of states that are not committed to safeguarding democracy. He said the Brazilian Senate faces two alternatives: approve Venezuelan accession to Mercosul and thereby place squarely on Chavez the burden of complying with Mercosul's accession terms, or deny accession, which Chavez could use to make himself a victim and martyr. Fortes seemed to be leaning toward the first option, which would hand Chavez a problem to resolve. The new chairman of the Agriculture committee said that in spite of criticism of Brazil's biofuels program by Fidel Castro and Hugo Chavez, Brazil will continue along the current path. End summary.

Concern for Democracy on the Continent

¶2. (SBU) Senator Fortes (Democrat, from Piaui state), chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations and National Defense Committee, over lunch with the Ambassador and three staffers from the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs on August 8, said he has concerns about threats to democracy on the South American continent. Twenty-five years ago there were many dictatorships, some stronger, some weaker. Now, the continent is ruled by democratic governments, some stronger, some weaker, he explained. The continent cannot afford to go back to dictatorship, which is why he calls for greater understanding of the importance of defending democracy. He stressed that Mercosul, a bloc whose purpose is in part to safeguard democracy, is right to create barriers to entry into it by states that would not safeguard democracy, adding that he did not see how Mercosul could be considered a threat to anyone. (Fortes repeated comments along these lines in brief remarks at a dinner with the Ambassador and nine other senators, septel).

¶3. (SBU) Ambassador Sobel said the USG is very supportive of any organization that can bring the region together and we are also supportive of any organization that can bring the hemisphere together.

¶4. (SBU) In response to a question from a House WHA Subcommittee staffer, Senator Fortes expressed strong concerns about Hugo Chavez's government. He recalled that Chavez had initially taken steps against the judiciary and legislature in Venezuela, and had

increasingly taken away freedom of the press. He said that Chavez alone did not constitute a threat to regional stability, but in concert with Evo Morales of Bolivia and their attempts to expand their ideology in the region, the situation is worrisome. He said he understood that Hugo Chavez is supporting and financing a candidate for president of Paraguay who would, if elected, deport Brazilian nationals working in agriculture areas in Paraguay. Chavez has not changed social conditions in Venezuela, Sen. Fortes continued, but what he is doing is an international "blocking" effort for his own benefit.

Venezuelan Accession to Mercosul

15. (SBU) Chavez had been irritated by the Brazilian Senate's resolution on the RCTV matter, and because he has an "explosive" nature, Fortes said, Chavez had made a commitment to win entry to Mercosul within 60 days. But there are two clauses in the Mercosul Charter that could block Venezuelans accession, Fortes said, one on taxes, the other concerning democracy. So Chavez threw the problem on Brazil, which leaves Brazil with two alternatives, Fortes said. The first alternative is to have Congress approve Venezuela's full accession then let accession itself be Chavez's problem, including coming into compliance with all the requirements for full accession. The other is to deny Venezuelan accession and make Chavez a victim and martyr. Fortes seemed to favor approving Venezuelan accession, thereby handing Chavez a big problem to resolve. He said the Senate still must debate the bill on Venezuelan accession to Mercosul. (Note: In a session with the House WHA Subcommittee staffers later that afternoon, Ministry of External Relations staff expressed no similar qualms regarding Venezuelan accession, saying that in inviting Venezuela to join, member governments have effectively approved accession. End note.)

16. (SBU) Fortes added that, in his view, Chavez has become a

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